

## Slice of Stimulus Package Will Go to Faster Trains

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*The federal stimulus package has a modest investment in California's plan for a bullet train. A conceptual view of high-speed rail on San Francisco Bay.*

It may be the longest train delay in history: more than 40 years after the first bullet trains zipped through Japan, the United States still lacks true high-speed rail. And despite the record \$8 billion investment in high-speed rail added at the last minute to the new economic [stimulus package](#), that may not change any time soon.

That money will not be enough to pay for a single bullet train, transportation experts say. And by the time the \$8 billion gets divided among the 11 regions across the country that the government has designated as high-speed rail corridors, they say, it is unlikely to do much beyond paying for long-delayed improvements to passenger lines, and making a modest investment in California's plan for a true bullet train.

In the short term, the money — inserted at the 11th hour by the White House — could put people to work improving tracks, crossings and signal systems.

That could help more trains reach speeds of 90 to 110 miles per hour, which is much faster than they currently go. It is much slower, however, than high-speed trains elsewhere, like the 180

m.p.h. of the newest Japanese bullet train. (The Acela trains on the East Coast are capable of 150 m.p.h., but average around half that.)

To some longtime proponents of high-speed rail who have watched with envy as other countries built ever-faster trains, failing to build a world-class high-speed train now would represent a tremendous missed opportunity to lure drivers off choked roads and fliers away from long delays at airports.

“What are we trying to achieve?” asked Joseph Vranich, a rail expert who wrote “Supertrains” (St. Martin’s Press, 1991). “If we really wanted to have high-speed rail in this country, and have it be a great success, then what we would do is concentrate the funds on the New York-Washington corridor, which is the top corridor in the country.”

Mr. Vranich warned that spreading the money around the country could dilute its power to build a true high-speed system, and he predicted that making incremental improvements to the speeds of trains around the country would not be enough to get large numbers of people to stop flying.

Even with full financing, it could take a decade or more to build a bullet train line. The state now closest to building a true high-speed system is California, where voters approved borrowing \$9 billion last fall to begin building a train that can go faster than 220 m.p.h.

“The California high-speed rail project is the only genuine pending project,” said Judge Quentin L. Kopp, the chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Mr. Kopp has outlined plans to spend up to \$2 billion of the stimulus money by the deadline of 2012 — one-quarter of the available federal money, but only a small part of the \$45 billion the project is expected to cost.

Many other states also have big plans. North Carolina, which is part of the Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor, will seek some of the stimulus money to speed rail service between Charlotte and Washington. Wisconsin wants to use some of it on a line linking Madison and Chicago, hoping to have trains running up to 110 m.p.h. Officials in Alabama want to be on a faster line connecting Atlanta and New Orleans.

Many rail advocates said that it would make sense to move to higher-speed rail before building true high-speed rail, and that getting the nation’s long-neglected rail system into working order could lay the foundation for future high-speed projects.

“You’ve got to walk before you can run, and we’ve just been crawling up to now,” said Ross B. Capon, the president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, an advocacy group for riders.

Many passenger trains run on tracks owned by freight companies, and they are slowed on long stretches of single track, where trains must pull onto sidings so others can pass.

Federal transportation officials said that they were still drawing up guidelines for how the money would be spent, and cautioned that it was too early to predict what they would do. Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) told reporters in Washington this week that he believed high-speed rail

would be [President Obama](#)'s transportation priority. Mr. LaHood said the department had recently given the White House a memorandum describing plans for high-speed rail in "at least six corridors" across the country.

But people who were excited by that prospect may be surprised to hear that the federal government defines "high speed" as much slower than other countries do. A diesel train in the United States that can go 90 m.p.h. is still considered high-speed under the government's definition.

So some projects financed by the bill may simply get intercity passenger rail back to where it was earlier in the 20th century, rather than closer to the futuristic vision of the trains of Europe and Asia, like the magnetic levitation, or maglev, train that whisks passengers from Shanghai to its airport 19 miles away in seven minutes, attaining a speed of 259 m.p.h.

The Acela is the United States' fastest train. But because the tracks it runs on are curvy, and are shared with many other trains, it is only able to reach its top speed of 150 m.p.h. on about 35 miles of track in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Its average speed is 84 m.p.h. between New York and Washington. Still, [Amtrak](#) has captured 62 percent of the combined air and rail market between New York and Washington, company officials said.

High-speed rail has a long, tortured history in the United States, going back to 1965, when Congress passed the High-Speed Ground Transportation Act. Since then, it has been proposed by many governors and studied in countless plans, always holding out the promise of catching up with other countries.

Voters in Florida passed a constitutional amendment requiring the state to build a high-speed rail system, only to repeal it a few years later after several prominent businesses, along with [Jeb Bush](#), who was then the governor, complained of its expense.

C. C. Dockery, who sponsored the campaign for the amendment, said in an interview that he and the other members of the Florida High-Speed Rail Authority were planning to meet late this month to discuss how to go about seeking some of the federal money.

"It would be a huge benefit to Florida," Mr. Dockery said.

Matthew L. Wald contributed reporting from Washington.

(View images from the article on the following page)



*Designated High-Speed Rail Corridors*



*Passengers board a high-speed train from Shanghai to Hangzhou, China.*



*The high-speed TGV in Bezannes, France.*



*The 500 series Shinkansen train near Tokyo.*



*The German ICE high-speed train arriving in Paris.*